

Transcripts Link Nixon to Cover-Up

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Significant passages omitted from the White House version of a key presidential conversation show that President Nixon in March, 1973, encouraged his top aides to continue the Watergate cover-up.

"I don't give a shit what happens," Mr. Nixon said. "I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover-up or anything else if it'll save it—save the plan. That's the whole point."

This statement is in a transcript of a March 22 conversation in the White House released yesterday by the House Judiciary Committee and omitted entirely from a transcript provided by the White House to the Watergate special prosecutor last January and subsequently to the committee and to the public.

The omitted conversation apparently was obtained from the end of a tape turned over to the committee March 26 by the Watergate grand jury.

Many other significant discrepancies—most of them damaging to the President's impeachment defense—emerged from the Judiciary Committee version of eight presidential conversations.

In the same March 22 conversation, for example, the President speaks of what he calls former Attorney General John N. Mitchell's argument "that we use flexibility in order to get on with the cover-up plan."

The White House version of the transcripts quotes Mr. Nixon as saying "that now we use flexibility in order to get off the cover-up line."

The references to the "cover-up plan" made by Mr. Nixon in the March 22 conversation are the only times these words are used by the President in the transcripts. They are never defined but are an apparent reference to containing the Watergate scandal within the White House.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, said that the tape released by the

Judiciary Committee was "in perfect harmony with the testimony we received, which showed that the same four presidential advisers met in February in California about how to deal with the committee."

"They concluded that they would be publicly in favor of the committee's investigation but would do everything they could to impede and obstruct the investigation," Ervin told reporters.

The Judiciary Committee version of the transcripts,

Meeting of March 22, 1973

President: "... all John Mitchell is arguing then, is that we now use flexibility in order to get off the cover-up line.

—White House transcript

President: "... all that John Mitchell is arguing, then, is that now we, we use flexibility ... in order to get on with the cover-up plan."

—Judiciary Committee transcript

obtained from higher quality equipment than was used by the White House for its version, gives the picture of a President who is more knowledgeable and more in charge than the presidential portrait that emerges from the White House transcripts.

However, both versions depict a President who frequently contradicts himself in discussing Watergate options.

For example, immediately after he had instructed

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Mitchell, then-White House counsel John W. Dean III and chief of staff H.R. (Bob) Haldeman to "stonewall it" during the March 22 conversation, the President said:

"On the other hand, uh, uh, I would prefer, as I said to you, that you do it the other way. And I would particularly prefer to do it that other way if it's going to come out that way anyhow."

The "other way" apparently is a reference to what was known in the White House as the policy of "limited hang out," a reference to making some facts about the scandal available through the Senate Watergate committee.

Nine days earlier, however, the Judiciary Committee version of a Nixon-Dean conversation on March 13 shows, the President already had rejected what he called "the hang-out road."

"Well, what about the hang-out thing?" he asked Dean. "... Uh, is it too late to, to, frankly, go the hang-out road? Yes, it is." (In the White House version, the last phrase, "Yes, it is," is omitted.)

When Dean responded, "I think it is," the President in the Judiciary version said: "The hang-out road's going to have to be rejected. I, some, I understand it was rejected." (The White House version omitted all but "the hang-out road".)

The transcripts released by the Judiciary Committee, while they filled in many of the unintelligible words in the White House version, still are not complete transcripts. In a foreword to the report, Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.) said that he and ranking minority member Edward Hutchinson (R-Mich.) had eliminated "irrelevant material which was considered to be defamatory, degrading or embarrassing."

Rodino said the transcripts were "nearly the same" in both versions but the committee released a 131-page comparison of the conflicting passages.

The release of the transcripts by the committee was sharply attacked by White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler as a "hyped PR campaign" against President Nixon.

"They have chosen the public relations route which will focus the news media only on one section of the tapes," Ziegler told two wire service reporters at the White House. "They should release the full body of evidence all together, all at once and not in piecemeal fashion."

The committee may do just that later this week when several thousand pages of evidence are expected to be released.

The version of the presidential conversations presented yesterday in the Judiciary Committee transcript suggests that Mr. Nixon knew far more about the Watergate cover-up than is revealed in the White House transcripts. Almost every change in the White House edited version seems to favor Mr. Nixon.

The highlights of the eight presidential conversations, and the differences between the Judiciary Committee and White House versions:

On Sept. 15, 1972 according to the committee version, the President, Haldeman and Dean discussed possible action against Edward Bennett Williams, lawyer for The Washington Post, and against The Washington Post Co. in its television stations' license renewal applications. This portion of the transcript, entirely omitted from the White House transcript was previously reported in The Washington Post.

In both the Judiciary and the White House versions

of a Feb. 28, 1973, conversation the President asked Dean whether the Watergate defendants expected that they would get clemency in "a reasonable time." In the White House version Dean did not respond. In the Judiciary version, Dean said, "I think they do..."

According to the Judiciary Committee version of the March 13 conversation, the President was told that a Haldeman aide, Gordon Strachan, not only knew of the Watergate incident but was going to testify to the contrary.

Dialogue between Mr. Nixon and Dean to the effect that Strachan knew about Watergate was in the White House version, but not included was this phrase: "Bob knew"—presumably Haldeman. In both versions, however, the President added that "he may not have."

Dean went on to say in both versions that Strachan "was judicious in what he relayed... but Strachan is as tough as nails."

Then, according to Judiciary's version only, the President asked: "What'll he say? Just go in and say he didn't know?"

Dean in the Judiciary version replied: "He'll go in and stonewall it and say, 'I don't know anything about what you are talking about.'..." In the White House version, it reads: "He can go in and stonewall..."

At another point in the March 13 testimony, Mr. Nixon says that Haldeman and Mitchell must have known about self-styled prankster Donald Segretti, who directed political espionage for the White House in the 1972 campaign and who subsequently pleaded guilty to violating federal campaign laws.

One of the key conversations occurred on the morning of March 21 when the President and Dean, later joined by Haldeman, spoke of the growing dimensions of the Watergate scandal and conspirator E. Howard Hunt's "blackmail" demands for \$120,000. The Watergate grand jury has charged that this meeting was one of the overt acts in furtherance of the cover-up conspiracy, and it is expected to be a key element in any impeachment charge made by the Judiciary Committee.

As with other conversations, the Judiciary Committee version of the March 21 conversation contains subtle hints that Mr. Nixon knew more than the White House transcript reveals.

When Mr. Nixon says in the White House version that "your major guy to keep under control is Hunt" he ends his statement with a question mark. The question mark is not present in the Judiciary version, where Dean replies (speaking about Hunt), "he knows so much."

Responds the President: "About a lot of things."

At another point the White House version has the President asking Dean about "the other probabilities." In the Judiciary version it is "the other vulnerabilities."

Still later, the President while referring to "the obstruction of justice thing" says, "I think that one we can handle."

In the White House version of the same passage Mr. Nixon says: "I don't think on the obstruction of justice thing—I take that out."

One page after this the White House transcript has.

Mr. Nixon speaking unclearly about giving money to Hunt: "But at the moment don't you agree it is better to get the Hunt thing that's where that—"

In the Judiciary version, the President says without evident ambiguity: "But at the moment don't you agree that you'd better get the Hunt thing? I mean, that's worth it, at the moment."

In one of the key passages of the entire transcripts the Judiciary Committee version has Mr. Nixon saying to Dean about Hunt: "Would you agree then that that's buy time thing? You better damn well get that done but fast."

In the White House version "buy time thing" becomes "the prime thing."

One of the central concerns of Mr. Nixon, as reflected in both transcript versions, is protecting the men around him.

This surfaces particularly in the portion of the March 22 transcript never transcribed by the White House where Mr. Nixon says that what is happening to Haldeman and Dean is "unfair."

"That's what Eisenhower, that's all he cared about," says the President. "He only cared about—Christ, be sure he was clean. Both in the fund thing and in the (Sherman) Adams thing. But I don't look at it that way. And I just—that's the thing I am really concerned with. We're going to protect our people if we can."

Both in the March 21 and March 22 conversations the President expressed personal interest in the fate of Watergate defendants.

On the afternoon of March 21, in a conversation joined by Dean, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, Hunt's money demands once more were mentioned. Ehrlichman said that Hunt also was interested in getting a pardon.

According to the House Judiciary version the President said, "I know," and added, "I mean he's got to get that by Christmastime."

By contrast, the White House transcript had Dean, rather than Mr. Nixon, saying, "He's got to get that by Christmas, I understand."

The final two transcripts released by Judiciary are of separate conversations on April 16, 1973. In the first, the President told Dean he was "planning to assume some culpability" in the paying of hush money to Hunt. In the White House version, Mr. Nixon is quoted as saying "that assumes culpability on that, doesn't it?"

The second April 16 transcript by the Judiciary Committee provides a lengthy if somewhat unclear discussion between Mr. Nixon and Dean on the impending removal from the presidential staff of Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean and how it would be explained. Nearly all of this discussion was omitted in the White House version.